

# Early Accounts of Jesus' Childhood

by Hugh W. Nibley\*

There are two widely separated traditions of the childhood of Jesus. The older and more valuable one, whose chief representative is a writing known as the *Protoevangelium of James*, was condemned by St. Jerome along with a great deal of ancient and authentic early Christian material and so came under the ban of the Popes.<sup>1</sup> In its place there grew up another and later tradition, a mass of popular fables and miracle stories which captivated the minds of the Middle Ages and have come down to us as the official "Infancy Gospels."<sup>2</sup> These stories are unabashed daydreams in which Jesus is always "the super-boy" whose tricks are the dread and envy of all His fellows: Jesus slides down a sunbeam or hangs His water pitcher on a sunbeam, and when the other boys try it with disastrous results Jesus instantly and magically mends the damage; when Joseph the carpenter has a hard time fitting pieces of wood together Jesus simply blesses them into place; when a local bully jostles Jesus in the street or breaks His sand castles with a stick, the offender is at a word from Jesus withered upon the spot; when the other kids will not play with Jesus He turns them into goats, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> Of course, it is the schoolteacher who takes the worst beating, being struck blind or dead if he dares to scold Jesus or tweak his ear—but only, of course, after Jesus has brilliantly illustrated His own wisdom and the teacher's ignorance.<sup>4</sup>

Separated "by an enormous gap" from this popular literature which so vividly reflects the mentality of late Antiquity is the earlier tradition, sober, plausible, and of recent discovery. New Greek and Cop-



CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE HEINRICH HOFMANN.

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tic manuscript finds now take us back more than 700 years earlier than any childhood accounts of Jesus heretofore known outside the Bible.<sup>5</sup> Yet it turns out that both traditions deal with the same basic stories. If we strip the later legends of their fantastic accreditations (which are easily recognized because of the conflicts among them), we may well ask whether the nonmiraculous elements they all have in common with each other and the earlier legends might not go back to a foundation of fact. What are these elements?

For one, all sources, early and late, Christian and anti-Christian, agree that Jesus' family was often in trouble and moved about a good deal. The early anti-Christian writers made much of this: a family of improvident ne'er-do-wells, tramping about the country looking for odd jobs; Mary a woman of the lowest classes and the loosest morals, working as a ladies' hairdresser, kicked out by her husband when she had an affair with a Roman soldier (they furnished the name, rank, and serial number), giving birth in disgrace to Jesus, the ambitious boy who picked up a bag of magic tricks in Egypt along with exalted ideas about His own divinity, and who gathered about Him a band of vagabonds and desperadoes with whom He ranged the countryside picking up a living by questionable means.<sup>6</sup>

Implicit in all the early Christian accounts of Jesus, Cullmann observes, is that they are obviously written *in reply* to these scandalous stories that were spread about concerning the young Jesus and His

(For Course 13, lesson of March 14, "Who Jesus Is"; and of general interest.)

<sup>1</sup>The subject is discussed at length by Oscar Cullmann in W. Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*; Tübingen: Mohr, 1959, I, 279, 302.

<sup>2</sup>Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, page 303.

<sup>3</sup>These stories are found in the *Pseudo-Gospel of Thomas*; *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, page 293; the *Miracles of Jesus*; in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 12:636; the *Pistis Sophia* and later works, cited in M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1953, pages 66-70. The most important later work and the source of the Golden Legend stories is the *Pseudo-Gospel of Matthew*; in James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, pages 73-79.

<sup>4</sup>*Pseudo-Thomas*, chapters 14, 17; *Miracles of Jesus*, in P. O. 12: 632, 635.

\*Hugh W. Nibley is a professor of history and religion at Brigham Young University. He obtained his B.A. at the University of California at Los Angeles and his Ph.D. at the University of California.

<sup>5</sup>M. Testuz, *Papyrus Bodmer*, No. V (1958); there is a complete discussion and translation of the text in Cullmann, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, pages 277-280. H. Wall, *A Coptic Fragment on the Childhood of John the Baptist* in *Rev. d'Egyptologie*, 8 (1951), 207-214, with a reproduction of the text.

<sup>6</sup>Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I, 27, 32; Talmund, *Sab. XII*, iv.



family at a very early date.<sup>7</sup> That is why they lay such stress on the spotless purity of Mary, give full play to the journey to Egypt, and emphasize the diligence of Joseph who "never at any time ate the bread of idleness," with the youthful Jesus always working hard at his side.<sup>8</sup>

Now we know who it was that gathered, embellished and published the scandal-stories about the family—it was the doctors of the schools, the same "Scribes and Pharisees" who relentlessly pursued Jesus and John the Baptist during their ministries. Here again all our sources agree that the trouble was about Jesus and that it was the local scribes who stirred up the people against Him and His family wherever they went.<sup>9</sup> And the people were easily stirred up since (again according to all reports) they were over-awed by Jesus and rather afraid of Him, like the widow woman who took the family in when they came to Egypt—"wrapped in strips of ragged stuff even as we are," says one early preacher—but turned them out of the house when Jesus (at the age of three) brought a dried fish to life.<sup>10</sup> The miraculous element is only to be expected, but would *pro-Christian* apologists all admit that the family was hated and persecuted because of Jesus if there was any reason for denying it? "Look how all the people hate and persecute us," Joseph complains to Jesus in a very early source.<sup>11</sup>

But what did Jesus do to make all that trouble? All the sources agree with *Luke* 2:52, that He was a good boy and everybody liked Him. Even our collectors of miracle tales are careful to specify that there was nothing abnormal about His family life: "... and He increased in stature like any other child, and He obeyed His parents, and performed all the other duties which it was proper for Him to do . . . He called Joseph 'my father,' and Joseph taught Him like a son, and He obeyed him like any good son."<sup>12</sup>

It was not anything Jesus did (it will not be necessary to show what is wrong with the popular "super-boy" stories), but rather things He said which according to the early sources got people upset and enraged the local clergy. The sayings attributed to Him as a child are significant, since they are found among the early *logia* of Jesus, some of which are being accepted by scholars today as genuine

utterances of the Lord:<sup>13</sup> "My nature is not like yours. I existed before you were born. . . . If you wish to become a father, be taught by me. . . . No one else has seen the mark of the cross which I have sworn to bear. . . . You do not know how you were born or where you came from; I alone know that. . . . I know where you were born, and I know it from my Father who knows me."<sup>14</sup> When He heals the foot of a young man who had injured himself with an axe, Jesus says, "Arise now, split the wood and think of me!" This is very close to the recently-discovered logion, "When you split the wood, there am I!" which scholars now accept as a genuine utterance of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Whether authentic or not, these childhood sayings of Jesus do represent the oldest, pre-Synoptic, Christian records. Also, all three references to Jesus' childhood in the New Testament mention His phenomenal wisdom, even the greatest doctors at Jerusalem being ". . . astonished at his understanding and answers." (*Luke* 2:47.)

Another significant element in the "Infancy" stories is their constant preoccupation with the Temple. This again is a mark of the earliest tradition, for as we have shown elsewhere, the Church writers after the fall of Jerusalem become definitely hostile to the Temple as a purely Jewish institution.<sup>16</sup> The main theme is Mary's service in the Temple, "behind the veil of the altar, where she offered up sacrifices"—a strange thing for a woman to do. "Her tunic came down over her seal, and her head-cloth came down over her eyes; she wore a sash around her tunic, and her outer garment was never soiled or torn. . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Of peculiar interest in the older stories are the accounts of the family's sojourns in the desert. The *Protoevangelium of James* tells how Jesus when He was eight walked with His family from Jericho to the Jordan, that is, right through the heart of the "Dead Sea Scrolls Country" at the very time when the communities were going full blast. On the way, we are told, young Jesus turned aside to inspect a cave where a lioness had a pair of cubs. The rest of the company were terrified, but the lioness and her cubs first trotted along down to the Jordan and then on out into the desert.<sup>18</sup> Now this is just the sort of thing one would expect to happen: the country was indeed peppered with caves, and lions

(Concluded on following page.)

<sup>7</sup>Cullmann, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, I, 279.

<sup>8</sup>Quote is from Demetrius, *On the Birth of Our Lord*, in E. A. W. Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts* (Br. Mus., 1915), page 656.

<sup>9</sup>His particular enemy is the son of Annas the Scribe, in some versions Annas himself, *Pseudo-Thomas*, Chapter 3; *Miracles of Jesus*, in P. O. 12:627. It is the Scribes who accuse the child Jesus of working miracles on the Sabbath and stir up the people against him. *Pseudo-Matthew*, in M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, page 16, and it is to them that the people complain about Him; it is with the Scribes at the local school that Jesus has the most trouble, above, Note 4.

<sup>10</sup>*Pseudo-Thomas* in James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, page 58. The quotation is from Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, page 679.

<sup>11</sup>*Pseudo-Thomas*, Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup>Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, pages 680, 689.

<sup>13</sup>We have treated the subject of the Logia in "Since Cumorah," *The Improvement Era*, November, 1964, page 924.

<sup>14</sup>The fullest collections are in the *Miracles of Jesus*, in P. O. 12:629-631, and the Syriac *Pseudo-Thomas*, Chapters 6-8.

<sup>15</sup>*Pseudo-Thomas*, Chapter 10, *The Gospel of Thomas*, Logion No. 77; most of the childhood sayings here quoted are found in this work. Jesus' double (in the *Pistis Sophia*, c. 61), his passing "through the midst of the Archons" (c. 7), also belong to the oldest Christian traditions.

<sup>16</sup>Hugh Nibley, in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 50 (1959).

<sup>17</sup>Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, pages 654-5; *Protoev. Jacobi*, Chapters 4-7.

<sup>18</sup>*Pseudo-Matthew*, in James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, page 77.



were being hunted there as late as the time of the Crusades. What Jesus did was just the sort of naive and foolhardy things that little boys do. The later legends, with the Pseudo-Matthew in the lead, make a great production of this: Jesus goes into a cave of dragons who instantly obey Him, while all the animals of the desert then accompany the family on their journey in a regular Dionysiac procession. Embellishing the sober old story of Anna, Jesus' grandmother, the same stories then have the trees of an oasis bowing down to Mary while a spring of water bursts forth at their feet, and so on.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the early version resists every temptation to tell a miracle story about the lions is a strong argument for its authenticity. But the thing to notice is that we have here the whole family going out beyond Jordan into John the Baptist's country.

A recently discovered Coptic fragment tells how Elizabeth took her son, John, and fled with him to Torine, which can mean either "the Hill country" or "the desert of Torine,"<sup>20</sup> the latter being favored in view of another Coptic source that says that Elizabeth and her son lived "in the desert of Torine" for years.<sup>21</sup> They actually had a house there, and a Coptic bishop who tells how Mary went out there to see Elizabeth cries, "I marvel at Thee, O virgin, how thou didst know where Torine was, and who showed thee the house of Zacharias. . . ." <sup>22</sup> When Elizabeth died, according to Serapion's *Life of John the Baptist*, Mary and Jesus came to spend a week with the 7½-year-old John. When their visit was at an end Mary had misgivings about leaving the boy: "Woe is me, O John, for thou art alone in the desert and hast no one." They did not leave, in fact, until they had "instructed John how to live in the desert," being themselves something of experts in desert lore. John, however, reassured them with the news that he would not be alone, but actually live in a community of prophets and angels, "as if it were a multitude of people."<sup>23</sup>

Now Serapion knew precious little about the desert Saints of Qumran who had disappeared 300 years before his day, and naturally thought as we do one living in the desert as necessarily living *alone*. But today we know that those very deserts in Jesus' time housed large communities of pious Jews who had retired from Jerusalem by invitation, in the manner of Lehi. Jesus, as we know from the Bible, often retreated to the desert, and the practice seems to go back to His childhood. After the return from

Egypt, according to the Pseudo-Thomas, "Joseph took Jesus into the desert where they lived until things quieted down at Jerusalem." Mary went to stay with her relatives in Capernaum, planning to join her husband later in Nazareth, "where Joseph possessed the property of his father." Then "when Jesus was 7 years old and things were quiet in the realm . . . they returned to Bethlehem and lived there."<sup>24</sup> James confirms the picture: "I, James, who wrote this, went into the desert when there was rioting in Jerusalem at the death of Herod."<sup>25</sup> It was the natural and customary thing to do, as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the example of Lehi amply attest.

The Proto-Gospel of James begins by telling how the righteous and childless Joachim, desiring a blessing, went out in the desert and lived in a tent for 40 days. It also tells that when doubts were expressed by some regarding the virginity of Mary, Joseph went out into the desert to be tested, after first submitting to the "water of testing"; and after he had returned, his honor vindicated, Mary went out next to undergo the same test.<sup>26</sup> The story is peculiar and awkward enough not to be anybody's invention, and indeed one is reminded of the great importance placed upon testing and examining the purity of all comers to the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and of their purging of defilements by baptisms and washings. If any doubts existed as to a person's sanctity, passing the tests of the holy covenanters of the desert would allay them.<sup>27</sup> A valuable apocryphal source first detected by this writer recounts that it was in one of the desert communities of priests by the banks of the Jordan that Mary became betrothed to Joseph.<sup>28</sup>

So we would suggest as a possible historical kernel of the stories about the childhood of Jesus certain basic propositions: 1) the family was poor and hard-working, 2) they moved about a good deal, 3) the youthful Jesus said things that astonished and disturbed people, 4) the local ministers stirred up trouble and spread scandalous reports about the family, and 5) they had connections with the pious heretics of the desert, whose writings are full of New Testament ideas and phraseology.

The Latter-day Saint reader cannot but note striking parallels between the early anti-Christian scandal stories and the Palmyra tales about the Joseph Smith family.

<sup>19</sup>In M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, page 59.

<sup>20</sup>Colophon of the *Protoev. Jacobi*, Chapter 25.

<sup>21</sup>*Protoev. Jacobi*, Chapter 16.

<sup>22</sup>See for example the "Manual of Discipline," III 4, 5, 8, 9; V 13, 14.

<sup>23</sup>Tha'labi, *Qissas al-Anbiyah* (Cairo, 1922) page 260.

Library File Reference: Jesus Christ—Childhood.

<sup>19</sup>In Cullmann, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, I, 306-308.

<sup>20</sup>H. Wall, in *Rev. d'Égyptologie*, 8 (1951), page 209.

<sup>21</sup>Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, page 682.

<sup>22</sup>Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, page 667.

<sup>23</sup>Text in Cullmann, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, I, 310-311.